



CHARACTERISTIC ANECDOTES OF LINCOLN

FROM UNPUBLISHED NOTES OF HIS PRIVATE
SECRETARY, JOHN G. NICOLAY

BY HELEN NICOLAY

THE great bulk of my father's notes and memoranda about Lincoln were of course used in the biography written in collaboration with John Hay. There are, however, others that he meant to print in a volume called "Personal Traits of Abraham Lincoln." But he was unfortunately not able even to begin the work. In what follows I have grouped together some of these notes which have a special personal interest.

LINCOLN'S CHOICE OF A PRIVATE SECRETARY

I BEGIN with a memorandum which shows how my father came to be Mr. Lincoln's private secretary.

"From the spring of 1857 to 1860 I was a clerk in the office of the Hon. O. M. Hatch, Secretary of State of Illinois, who in that capacity occupied a large and well-appointed room in the old State House at Springfield. The State Library, of which the Secretary had charge, was in an adjoining room, also large and commodious, which by common consent was used by all political parties when assembled at State conventions, or during sessions of the legislature, as a political caucus-room, the entrance to it being through the Secretary's main office. This office of the Secretary of State was therefore in effect the State political headquarters, and a frequent

rendezvous for prominent Illinois politicians, more especially for those of the Republican party, to which Mr. Hatch belonged. Mr. Lincoln was of course a frequent visitor, and, when he came, was always the center of an animated and interested group. It was during the years mentioned that I made his acquaintance. All the election records were kept by the Secretary of State, and I, being Mr. Hatch's principal clerk, had frequent occasion to show Mr. Lincoln, who was an assiduous student of election-tables, the latest returns or the completed record-books.

"As soon as the Chicago Convention was ended, I was filled with an ambitious desire to write a campaign biography of the Republican candidate for President, and was greatly disappointed and chagrined to learn that that honor had already been promised to a young Ohioan, then little known, but now famous in American literature,—William D. Howells,—who performed his task much more worthily than I could have done.

"My compensation soon came. Only a day or two later Mr. Lincoln appointed me his private secretary, without any solicitation on my part, or, so far as I know, of any one else, and, I presume, simply on account of the acquaintance formed as above stated."

He does not go on to relate how the knowledge that he was chosen for this

close personal office came to him—how Mr. Hatch, seeing that something was amiss, questioned him, and found out his disappointment, and then, laying his hand kindly on the young man's arm, changed the disappointment to joy by saying, "Never mind, Nicolay; you are to be private secretary." But I have heard him tell of it, his voice softening and his eyes aglow with the happiness that came to him in that far-off hour.

LINCOLN'S MELANCHOLY

MR. LINCOLN's sadness was not a foreboding of personal disaster, but a deep recurring melancholy that came upon him in moments of quiet; and, after he entered the Presidency, a sense of the almost crushing responsibility that lay upon him. To make life possible under this leaden weight, he had his inextinguishable sense of humor and his kindly genuine interest in the people about him. He really liked men, and with them he was as other men are, cordial, direct, and hearty. "His manner," my father says, "was in no wise exceptional or peculiar. His moods varied with time and circumstance, as do those of ordinary men. He was always natural and simple, took note of commonplace matters, as they happened, in a commonplace way, his humor bubbling out frequently unless some serious topic happened to be under discussion."

LINCOLN AND RELENTLESS FATE

It is not the fashion in these days to dwell on the pagan idea of fate—an enveloping, encompassing atmosphere of doom from which man can no more escape than he can from the air about him. Yet if there is one man in history whose story vies with the heroes and martyrs of Greek drama in emphasizing this idea, it is Abraham Lincoln. A shadow hung over him from childhood. It darkened and lightened and darkened again, but never left him. His innate cheerfulness and common sense strove constantly against it, his brilliant wit pierced it repeatedly; but it could not be dispelled. After a time it ceased to be a mere personal fate, and became the foreboding of a nation's tragedy. This was in 1860.

Five years later its fulfilment plunged the world in gloom.

An entry in my father's note-book, dated Springfield, October 18, 1860, runs as follows: "Among the many things said in a general way to Mr. Lincoln by his visitors, there is nearly always an expressed hope that he will not be so unfortunate as were Harrison and Taylor, to be killed off by the cares of the Presidency, or, as is sometimes hinted, by foul means. It is astonishing how the popular sympathy for Mr. Lincoln draws fearful forebodings from these two examples, which, after all, were only a natural coincidence. Not only do visitors mention the matter, but a great many letters have been written to Mr. Lincoln on the subject."

The sinister fate, all undreamed of, was yet felt, and the feeling found expression in sayings and doings of the people, as popular feelings will. It was not merely in letters and historical parallels that their unconscious forebodings found expression. A homely and naïve instance is given in a little scene observed by an eye-witness¹ as he sat in the Governor's room at the State House, where Lincoln received his visitors during that campaign summer. "One day several weeks ago," this man wrote, "two country boys came along the dark passage that leads to his room. One of them looked in at the door, and then called to his fellow behind, saying, 'Come on; he is here.' The boys entered, and he spoke to them. Immediately one of them said that it was reported in their neighborhood that he [Mr. Lincoln] had been poisoned, and their father had sent them to see if the report was true. 'And,' said the boy, with all earnestness, 'dad says you must look out, and eat nothing only what your old woman cooks; and mother says so, too.'"

The candidate sent them away with a smile and a reassuring word, for though his destiny might envelop him like a gloomy mantle, he was far too unselfconscious and simple-minded to imagine that fate had any special concern with him.

The two country boys passed on, and Lincoln turned to greet the next comer, and the next, and the next, of all those who visited the Governor's room that long summer. He was keenly interested in them as men, or friends, or political

¹ The Rev. Albert Hall, pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church of Springfield, Illinois.

allies, or opponents—had a smile for one, a story or an earnest word for another, a hearty hand-clasp for each, and never a thought of the grim personal destiny that set him apart from them all.

Old neighbors who trusted him, political friends who admired him, men bent on questioning or cajoling him, doubters who came from a distance to see for themselves what manner of Western mountebank a freak of popular favor had made candidate of the great Republican party, passed before him, and each instinctively felt the kindness and honesty that shone from his deeply furrowed face—that wonderfully expressive face of his, mirthful, shrewd, melancholy, suffused with emotion by turns, homely in its rugged uncompromising outlines, almost divinely beautiful in the tenderness of expression it could assume, ineffably sad in the look it habitually wore in repose. It was like nothing in nature so much as a grand mountain range on which the mystery of the illuminating sun works its transformations. The neighbors knew it of old, and loved it, though they would probably have called it ugly. The new-comers marveled at it, but soon forgot to question whether it were handsome or not, it so expressed the man, with his reserves of strength and power that gave his gentler qualities their force.

The gay repartee, the quick crossing of wits, the hand-clasps, the earnest words, went on, and behind them loomed the shadow—a dread of what the future had in store not for himself, but for his country, now in the hands of men incapable, if not disloyal, and drifting toward great peril.

My father made note of Lincoln's "quick changes from gaiety, story-telling, and laughter to sadness and earnestness when the door closed on his departing visitors"—how "he would sometimes sit for an hour in complete silence, his eyes almost shut, the inner man apparently as far from him as if the form in his chair were a petrified image." No wonder, in view of what came to pass, that, as the door closed, the jest and smile died from his lips, and a sadness like that of night settled upon him.

"Lincoln's prevailing mood in later years," he says again, "was one of meditation. Unless engaged in conversation,

the external world was a thing of minor interest. Not that he was what is called absent-minded. He did not forget the spectacles on his nose, and his eye and ear lost no sound or movement about him when he sat writing in his office, or among the people he passed on a sidewalk. But while he noted external incidents, they remained secondary, subservient; his mind was ever busy in reflection, and his soul absent in the wide realms of thought."

PERILOUS DAYS BEFORE THE STORM

THE election came, with its triumph, and its added care. The shadow drew a long step nearer. On him rested the responsibility of rescuing the country when he became President. But by the fourth of March what would be left to save?

One of the notes gives a vivid picture of a scene enacted in Buchanan's presence in those troublous days, as told to Mr. Lincoln in the very room where it occurred, by one who strove to prevent the wrong Buchanan's weakness caused, and afterward labored heroically with Lincoln to right it. The President and the Secretary of War were talking about the surrender of Fort Donelson, of which news had just come.

"What a pity Floyd escaped!" some one suggested.

"I am sorry he got away," said Stanton. 'I want to catch and hang him!' Continuing, he said: 'The last time I saw Floyd he was in this room, lying on the sofa which then stood between the windows yonder. I remember it well. It was on the night of the nineteenth of last December. We had had high words, and almost come to blows in our discussion over Fort Sumter. Thompson was here. Thompson was a plausible talker, and, as a last resort, having been driven from every other argument, advocated the evacuation of the fort on the plea of generosity. South Carolina was but a small State, with a sparse white population. We were a great and powerful people and a strong and vigorous government. We could afford to say to South Carolina, "See, we will withdraw our garrison as an evidence that we mean you no harm."

"I said to him, "Mr. President [Buchanan], the proposal to be generous implies that the government is strong, and that we as the public servants have the

confidence of the people. I think that is a mistake. No administration has ever suffered the loss of public confidence and support as this has done. Only the other day it was announced that a million dollars had been stolen from Mr. Thompson's department. The bonds were found to have been taken from the vault where they should have been kept, and the notes of Mr. Floyd were substituted for them. Now, all I have to say is that no administration, much less this one, can afford to lose a million of money and a fort in the same week."

"'Floyd lay there and never opened his mouth. The next morning he sent in his resignation, and he never came into the room again.'"

Perilous days truly! And Lincoln, though elected to be the next President, was as unable to prevent the wrongs as though he were a child unborn. Until the fourth of March should come, he had no power, and could only stand by and see the shameful work go on.

Then followed the journey to Washington, with its cheering thousands flocking about him and shouting themselves hoarse in his honor, and at the end a menace so threatening to his bodily safety that men whose opinion he could not disregard insisted that he should enter the nation's capital by stealth. After that the inauguration pageant, stately and imposing, a climax of honor for the man who had risen with no help but his own sterling worth from the lowest place to the highest in the nation's gift; and, as he entered the White House, the shadow came and rested beside him, never to withdraw. Again my father's notes, brief as they are, give a picture in Lincoln's own words of what he felt, and the problem that confronted him on the threshold of his new office.

"Washington, July 3, 1861. This evening the President, in conversation with Mr. O. H. Browning, to whom he had just read his message, not yet completed, said:

"'Browning, of all the trials I have had since I came here, none begin to compare with those I had between the inauguration and the fall of Fort Sumter. They were so great that, could I have anticipated them, I would not have believed it possible to survive them.

"'The first thing that was handed to me after I entered this room, when I came from the inauguration, was the letter from Major Anderson, saying that their provisions would be exhausted before an expedition could be sent to their relief.'"

LINCOLN AND THE OFFICE-SEEKERS

BESIDES the great and crowning anxiety, there were countless lesser ones—the harassment of beginning the new administration, the uncertainty as to whom he could trust at this time when ordinary standards were set aside and men professed loyalty and worked treason. Not the least of his problems was hearing and answering and withstanding the throngs of office-seekers who pressed upon him with claims of promised places, demands for favors, and services of all sorts. "I am looking forward with a good deal of eagerness," my father wrote, "to when I shall have time to read and write my letters in peace, and without being haunted continually by some one who 'wants to see the President for only five minutes.' At present this request meets me from almost every man, woman, and child I see, whether by day or night, in the house, or on the street."

"I shall go to Washington, if at all, an unpledged man," Mr. Lincoln had told the friend who looked on at his interview with the boys. Then, as the latter gave him his hand to take leave, he held it and added: "Mr. Hale, I have read my Bible some, though not half as much as I ought, and I have always regarded Peter as sincere when he said he would never deny his Master. Yet he did deny him. Now, I think I shall keep my word and maintain the stand I have taken; but, then, I must remember that I am liable to infirmity, and may fall." The same humility that prompted this, and the thankful pressure of the still-clasped hand with which he answered Mr. Hale's, "May He who kept Peter in the right after the terrible experience of his fall, keep you firm and faithful without any such experience!" led him, now that he was President, to see and listen patiently to them all, no matter how absurd the request or how insistent the demand. His kindness, his sense of humor, and his self-control led him to meet the avalanche with serenity.

"But," my father says, "while Lincoln's manner was one of almost unflinching good-humor and quiet tolerance of even discourtesy toward himself, there were occasions when he gave indications that there was a limit even to his patience. In the early days of his first term, when the rush of office-seekers was at its height, there came a delegation to urge some California appointments which were earnestly opposed by Colonel E. D. Baker, then United States Senator from Oregon. The delegation had for its spokesman an ex-Californian who was a violent enemy of Baker, who both in the verbal interview and in the papers he presented made coarse and criminal accusations against Colonel Baker's integrity and honor. Now, the President and Baker had been intimate personal friends and political associates in their early years at Springfield, and Lincoln therefore knew the accusations to be groundless. He intimated as much to the accuser, but the latter persisted with all the more vehemence. Mr. Lincoln heard him through in silence, and when he had finished, handed him back his papers; but the latter refused them saying: 'I wish you to keep them, Mr. President. They are yours.'

"'Mine to do with as I please?' said Lincoln.

"'Yes,' was the reply.

"The President stepped to the fireplace and thrust the papers between the blazing brands, and as the room was lighted up with the fresh flame, he dismissed the interviewers with a stern look and a simple 'Good morning, gentlemen.'"

HOW LINCOLN SHOULDERED HIS RESPONSIBILITY

OF his days as President, after the shadow took on the lurid glow of war, of the endless disappointments, the few, far-scattered gleams of joy, the strain of keeping up the courage and spirit of a whole nation during the weary days and months and years when victory lagged and malice and faint-heartedness took counsel against him, who can write with sufficient feeling? His gaunt face assumed other and still deeper lines, his shoulders seemed to bear the weight of the whole struggle, his heart the burden of all the sorrows brought about by the long and dreadful

war. People criticized him for all he did and all he left undone, for following this policy or not pursuing that. He went on day by day, listening to all, yielding to none, guided only by his own uncompromising conscience. Just here another of the fragmentary notes comes in—a memorandum of a conversation with Senator Lot M. Morrill of Maine long after Mr. Lincoln's death. Senator Morrill had been Governor when Lincoln was nominated. He accepted him then as the lesser political evil, but he came to regard him at his true worth.

"'I remember,' he said, 'that I went into his office one day.

"'Well, Governor,' Mr. Lincoln asked jestingly, 'who has been abusing me in the Senate to-day?'

"'I replied, 'Mr. President, I hope not any of us abuse you knowingly or wilfully.'

"'Oh, well,' said he, 'I don't mean that,—personally you are all very kind,—but I know we don't all agree as to what this administration should do and how it ought to be done.' And then our talk branched off on the general situation. Finally he said with great impressiveness: 'I don't know but that God has created some one man great enough to comprehend the whole of this stupendous crisis and transaction from end to end, and endowed him with sufficient wisdom to manage and direct it. I confess I do not fully understand and foresee it all. But I am placed here where I am obliged to the best of my poor ability to deal with it. And that being the case, I can only go just as fast as I can see how to go.'

"'That,' continued Mr. Morrill, 'was the way he saw this thing—as a stupendous movement, which he watched, and upon which he acted as he might best do when in his judgment the opportune moment came. I was satisfied he comprehended it as thoroughly as any man living could do. He saw that it was an immense affair, that in his dealings with it he must be backed by immense forces; and to this end it was his policy to hold the nation true to the general aim, to disregard petty deviations and delays. He saw the progress we made from time to time in its larger and more important aspects and relations. He moderated, guided, controlled, or pushed ahead as he

saw his opportunity. He was, in short, the great balance-wheel that kept the ship true to its course."

Of Lincoln the man in those same days it is even harder to write—of the grief that came to him in the death of his son, the weariness of soul and body, the tender-heartedness that made him adopt other people's sorrows as his own. For him holding the Ship of State true to her course was not following cast-iron precedent in matters small or great: it was following the Golden Rule, and that other divine injunction that he who would be great among his fellow-men must serve them.

It was this that made him pore over the endless court-martials, and pardon every soldier, if the evidence made it possible, despite the War Secretary's choleric declaration that such leniency was ruining the army. One of the notes shows that it was in labors of this kind that Lincoln spent the morning after his triumphant reelection to the Presidency. The shadow was too deep to let him dwell upon his own success.

ONE SON RETURNED TO A PLEADING MOTHER

THE conviction that he was President, not to be hedged about with ceremony, but to serve the people, made him feel that he must be freely accessible to them. So no matter how dark the shadow that lay across his threshold, or how heavy the burden of care, his door was almost daily opened between certain hours, and all who would might enter and speak with him. This brings me to perhaps the most interesting of all the notes—that of a conversation with the Hon. James Speed, one of Mr. Lincoln's oldest friends, in which he told of a happening in the Executive Office during one of my father's infrequent absences.

"It is extremely difficult," said Mr. Speed, 'to portray adequately the exquisite pathos of Mr. Lincoln's character as manifested in his action from time to time. There was, for instance, the incident of granting a discharge to the woman's sons.

" "Is that all?" he asked of Edward, the usher, after the usual multitude of daily visitors had entered and presented their requests, petitions, or grievances.

" "There is one poor woman there yet, Mr. President," replied Edward. "She has been here for several days, and has been crying and taking on, and has n't got a chance to come in yet."

" "Let her in," said Mr. Lincoln.

"The woman came in and told her story. It was just after the battle of Gettysburg. She had a husband and three sons in the army, and she was left alone to fight the hard battle of life. At first her husband had regularly sent her a part of his pay, and she had managed to live. But gradually he had yielded to the temptations of camp-life, and no more remittances came. Her boys had become scattered among the various armies, and she was without help. Would not the President discharge one of them, that he might come home to her?

"While the pathetic recital was going on, the President stood before the fireplace, his hands crossed behind his back, and his head bent in earnest thought. When the woman ended and waited a moment for his reply, his lips opened, and he spoke, not indeed as if he were replying to what she had said, but rather as if he were in abstracted and unconscious self-communion.

" "I have two, and you have none."

"That was all he said. Then he walked across to his writing-table at which he habitually sat, and, taking a blank card, wrote upon it an order for the son's discharge; and upon another paper he wrote out in great detail where she should present it, to what department, at what office, and to what official, giving her such direction that she might personally follow the red-tape labyrinth.

"A few days later, at a similar close of the general reception for the day, Edward said, "That woman, Mr. President, is here again, and still crying."

" "Let her in," said Lincoln. "What can be the matter now?"

"Once more he stood in the same place before the fireplace, and for the second time heard her story. The President's card had been like a magic passport to her. It had opened forbidden doors, and softened the sternness of official countenances. By its help she had found headquarters, camp, regiment, and company. But instead of giving a mother's embrace to a lost son restored, she had arrived only

in time to follow him to the grave. The battle at Gettysburg, his wounds, his death at the hospital—the story came in eloquent fragments through her ill-stifled sobs. And now would not the President give her the next one of her boys?

“Once more Mr. Lincoln responded with sententious curtness, as if talking to himself, “I have two, and you have none,” sharp and rather stern, the compression of his lips marking the struggle between official duty and human sympathy. Then he again walked to his little writing-table and took up his pen to write for the second time an order which would give the pleading woman one of her remaining boys. And the woman, as if moved by a filial impulse she could not restrain, moved after him and stood by him at the table as he wrote, and with the fond familiarity of a mother placed her hand upon the President’s head and smoothed his wandering and tangled hair. Human grief and human sympathy had overleaped all the barriers of formality, and the ruler of a great nation was truly the servant, friend, and protector of this humble woman, clothed for the moment with a paramount claim of loyal sacrifice. The order was written and signed; the President rose and thrust it into her hand with a choking ejaculation, “There!” and hurried from the room, followed so long as he could hear by the thanks and blessings of an overjoyed mother’s heart. The spoken words of the scene were few and commonplace, but a volume could not describe the deep, suppressed emotion or the simple, pathetic eloquence of the act.”

So in works of wisdom and kindness his life went on to the end, when the sun was darkened for millions of his fellow-men; but for him fate was fulfilled, and the shadow was lifted. As he lay in the sleep of death, the sadness had departed from his face; only the benignity remained.

THE PILLARS OF LINCOLN’S FAME

ONE more note of my father’s I must give in closing—a summary in his own handwriting, made when writing had become well-nigh impossible for him, of what his dearest friend and greatest hero achieved and died for.

“LINCOLN’S ACHIEVEMENTS.

“Turned his defeat for the Senate into a success for the Presidency.

“Took into the cabinet his rivals, and made them his ministers and servants.

“Conquered the Rebellion.

“Liberated the slaves.

“Outwitted all the intrigues against him in cabinet and camp.

“Gave his implacable rival the Chief-Justiceship.

“Disarmed all criticism by shouldering all faults.

“Consolidated his party and increased his majorities.

“Held the people to their great task.

“Made the strongest argument for peace, and the best defense of war.

“Gave in his Springfield Prayer, his Gettysburg Address, and his Second Inaugural the most pathetic and eloquent utterances of his time.

“Forcible in speech and faultless in logic, he enriched the language with new thoughts, new definitions, new maxims, new parables, and new proverbs.

“Was a true type and exemplar of his country, his race, and his government.

“Wore honor without pride, and wielded power without oppression.

“Lived like a peasant by necessity of birth and fortune, reigned like a monarch by right representative instincts, native intellect, the wisdom of humility, and love of his fellow-men.

“Died a martyr, and was wept by the civilized world.”



